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SUBJECT: DANGERS OF DICHTER'S DISENGAGEMENT DEBATE

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones; Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) Summary and comment: Former Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) chief and Kadima candidate Avi Dichter set off a political firestorm on March 5 by leaking to reporters details of what he claims are A/PM Ehud Olmert's plans for disengagement from parts of the West Bank. Dichter said that after the March 28 elections the GOI will evacuate a number of isolated outposts and settlements, integrating the settlers into the major blocs behind the separation line barrier. These ideas mesh with current MOD plans to minimize contact between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank by constructing the barrier and separate transportation networks. While rejecting Dichter's negative views on the Roadmap, Olmert and his cabinet have told USG officials that the lack of a Palestinian partner leaves them no alternative to steps to minimize contact between Israelis and Palestinians. In the Embassy's analysis, such steps -- coupled with threats to turn Karni and Erez into international crossings -- run the risk of separating the West Bank from Gaza, increasing the economic hardship of the Palestinian population, and fostering instability. ConGen Jerusalem septel will report on implications for the Palestinians of Dichter's proposals. End summary and comment.

Dichter's "Disengagement II" (D2)

2. (U) According to Dichter, Israel will maintain control over the three largest blocs -- Maale Adumim, Ariel, and Gush Etzion -- as well as three smaller blocs -- Qarnei Shomron, Qedumim, Ofra-Beit El, and Hebron-Qiryat Arba -- and over the Jordan Valley. He added that the areas included in the blocs will be unilaterally decided by Israel without input from the Palestinians. He named several smaller settlements that would be evacuated, including Elon Moreh, Yitzhar, Itamar, Shiloh, Psagot, Teqoa, Nokdim, Pnei Hever, Ma'on, and Otniel.

3. (C) Dichter insisted that a West Bank disengagement would differ from the Gaza withdrawal, because Israel would maintain security responsibility over the evacuated areas. He said that Israel must act unilaterally because it lacks a Palestinian partner, a situation he claimed effectively means the end of the Roadmap. Dichter's ideas mesh closely with what the MOD has told embassies repeatedly over the past year, i.e., that the GOI is actively working to separate Israeli and Palestinian populations in the West Bank. The MOD describes the goal as minimizing friction between the IDF and Palestinians -- and protecting settlers -- by completing the separation barrier, building separate transportation infrastructure, and replacing military personnel with civilian contractors at the crossings. In addition, DefMin Shaul Mofaz has long advocated "the completion of Gaza disengagement" by transforming Erez and Karni into international crossings and unconfirmed press reports say MOD planners are considering suspension of all travel between Gaza and the West Bank. Deputy National Security Adviser Eran Etzion (protect) acknowledged that the GOI intends to internationalize the crossings if Hamas refuses to accept the international communities three conditions. He also asserted that no one in the GOI is talking about, planning for, or otherwise engaged in thinking about how to develop a moderate Palestinian political grouping to counter Hamas.

4. (U) Dichter's remarks drew immediate criticism from opposition parties in the run-up to the March 28 Knesset elections. Likud Knesset leader Gideon Saar called any West Bank disengagement a "prize to Hamas." The press claimed that Olmert plans to barter West Bank disengagement for international -- primarily U.S. -- recognition of new Israeli borders incorporating the settlement blocs. Kadima candidate and former PM Shimon Peres responded by telling reporters that he supports the Roadmap and negotiated peace. Etzion dismissed Dichter's remarks as an attempt to burnish his Kadima credentials after previous comments that were at odds with the party line.

Comment: GOI Steps Unlikely to Help Hamas Opponents

5. (S) Comment: A/PM Olmert has repeatedly told CoDels and the Ambassador that he remains committed to the Roadmap. In a February 26 discussion with A/S Welch, Olmert said that it would be a mistake to withdraw from -- or to bypass -- the

Roadmap. That said, Olmert and several members of his cabinet are clearly of the opinion that "there is no Palestinian partner" and are committed to steps that will ensure a Jewish majority in Israel and the areas it intends to retain following a peace agreement. Such a strategy -- assuming Kadima wins the election -- is likely to include the evacuation of isolated settlements in the West Bank.

16. (C) In the meantime, the GOI will continue to pursue steps to minimize contact between Israelis and Palestinians, especially construction of the barrier and separate transportation routes in the West Bank. Coupled with threats to turn Karni and Erez into international crossings, such steps -- if implemented -- would effectively sever the few remaining links between the West Bank and Gaza and remove Gaza from the customs envelope. These measures would in the GOI's view essentially return Gaza to a pre-1967 situation, leaving responsibility for facilitation of Gaza's international trade and humanitarian relief to Egypt. If implemented in the form outlined by Dichter, the West Bank disengagement/retrenchment plan answers most of Israel's security concerns but offers little to the Palestinians. While much could change between now and the time a new government is formed after the March 28 elections, a GOI request for a U.S. endorsement of such a plan should not be ruled out.

17. (U) This message was coordinated with ConGen Jerusalem.

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